United Nations A/71/682–S/2016/1049

General Assembly
Security Council

Distr.: General
13 December 2016

Original: English

General Assembly
Seventy-first session
Agenda item 36
The situation in Afghanistan

Security Council
Seventy-first year

The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/11 and Security Council resolution 2274 (2016), in which I was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including significant humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of my previous report (A/71/616-S/2016/768). It also provides a summary of key political and security developments and regional and international events relating to Afghanistan.

II. Relevant developments

3. The President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, and the Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, presented the Afghan National Peace and Development Framework at the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, held on 5 October, in which international partners confirmed their intention to provide $15.2 billion in support of the country's development priorities until 2020. Ongoing tensions in the executive branch and the vote to dismiss several Cabinet ministers by the lower house of the National Assembly contributed to political volatility. This occurred against a backdrop of intensifying armed clashes between security forces and the Taliban. The names of commissioners for the electoral management bodies that are to pursue electoral reforms and prepare for elections were announced. The Government also advanced its anti-corruption agenda. A peace agreement was signed by the Government with Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin), but prospects for talks

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with the Taliban have not improved. Increasing levels of violence resulted in high civilian casualties, including a disturbing number of child casualties, and significant new displacements. The rate of return of Afghan refugees and undocumented Afghans from Pakistan increased rapidly, further exacerbating the fragile humanitarian situation.

A. Political developments

4. President Ghani and Mr. Abdullah took steps to address their working relationship after a period of tensions. The two leaders held a series of meetings to discuss their differences, including on power-sharing, delegation of responsibilities between senior government officials, and high-level appointments.

5. Criticism was voiced by other senior political figures within the Government on its inner workings. On 24 October, the First Vice-President, Abdul Rashid Dostum, publicly accused the President and the Chief Executive of nepotism and ethnic bias in appointments. The offices of the President and the Chief Executive condemned the First Vice-President's statement. Other government figures also publicly stated their concerns: the President's Special Representative on Reforms and Good Governance, Ahmad Zia Massoud, underlined the need for the Government to overcome rifts in its leadership, and the Second Vice-President, Sarwar Danish, and the Second Deputy of the Chief Executive, Mohammad Mohaqiq, called attention to the need for greater power-sharing in the Government and stressed the need to improve its workings, respectively.

6. The second anniversary of the Government passed without notable incident, but underlying tensions have yet to be constructively addressed. After its earlier assertions that the political agreement of 2014 establishing the National Unity Government expired two years after its signing, the Afghan Protection and Stability Council indicated after the anniversary on 21 September that it would seek to help the Government to carry out its five-year mandate. On 1 November, the Council formed a commission to assist with mediating disputes within Government. Other opposition figures, including the former President, Hamid Karzai, and his supporters, maintained a critical stance.

7. Vocal opposition to the Government continued from the Enlightenment Movement, an ethnic Hazara group seeking the rerouting of a major electricity infrastructure project and broader representation of the younger generation of Hazaras in Government. Meanwhile, following the ceremonial reburial by Tajik activists of former King Habibullah Kalakani early in September, ethnic Pashtun protesters staged several counterdemonstrations in Kabul and in south-eastern provinces. The registered political wing Hizb-i Islami (Arghandiwal) held demonstrations across the country in support of the peace agreement of 29 September between the Government and Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin), while protests against the agreement were held in Baghlan Province.

8. In mid-November, the lower house of the National Assembly voted to dismiss senior Cabinet ministers on allegations that they had underspent their allocated development budgets. Between 12 and 15 November, the lower house of the National Assembly passed no-confidence votes on 7 of the 16 ministers summoned, namely the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Salahuddin Rabbani, the Minister of Public

Works, Mahmood Baligh, the Minister of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled, Nasreen Oryakhel, the Minister of Education, Assadullah Hanif Balkhi, the Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation, Muhammadullah Batash, the Minister of Higher Education, Farida Momand, and the Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Abdul Razaq Wahedi. On 19 October, the Minister of Tribal Affairs, Gulab Mangal, was appointed Governor of Nangarhar Province on 19 October, and on 7 November the Minister of Information and Culture, Abdul Bari Jahani, resigned. The Ministry of Mines and Petroleum and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance have lacked appointed heads for several months. The dismissal of the Ministers of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled and of Higher Education would leave only two women ministers in the Cabinet.

9. The Government reaffirmed its commitment to implementing electoral reforms in the communiqué of the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan. On 25 September, following the parliament's failure in June to approve an earlier decree on electoral law, the Government issued a decree merging the Election Law and the Law on the Structure as well as the Duties and Authorities of the Independent Election Commission and the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission into a single piece of legislation. It incorporated some of the recommendations of the Special Electoral Reform Commission formed in 2015, including changing the composition of the Selection Committee tasked with nominating new election commissions, reducing the number of Independent Election Commission commissioners from nine to seven, and reducing the length of their tenure from six years to five with staggered terms. It also mandates the Independent Election Commission to recommend to the Cabinet the electoral constituencies for the next parliamentary and provincial council elections, within three months of its appointment.

10. The recruitment process for the incoming electoral commissions started on 28 September. A Selection Committee was established and considered candidates for electoral commissions in sessions open to civil society, the media and the international community. Two shortlists, of 21 Independent Election Commission and 15 Electoral Complaints Commission nominees, were introduced to President Ghani on 9 November, and the Selection Committee announced the names of the nominees the following day. President Ghani and Mr. Abdullah met jointly with political figures on 12 and 17 November to discuss the appointment process. Between 14 and 16 November, the shortlisted nominees were interviewed by a panel chaired by President Ghani and comprising Mr. Abdullah, the Second Vice-President, the Attorney General, the Chairperson of the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution, and a representative of the Supreme Court. The members of the election commissions were announced on 22 November. Of the 12 commissioners, 3 are women.

11. There was no substantive movement towards a peace process between the Government and the Taliban. Following a number of press reports in October, a Taliban spokesperson publicly acknowledged that a delegation from the political commission based in Qatar travelled to Pakistan to discuss various issues relating to Afghanistan with the movement's leadership and the Pakistani authorities.

12. The Government and Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) signed a peace agreement on 29 September. Under the 25-article agreement, Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) formally recognized the Constitution of Afghanistan and promised to halt military activity,

while the Government agreed to welcome the group's participation in politics, to request the delisting of its figures from international sanctions and to incorporate some former members into the Afghan security forces, without specifying a vetting process to determine involvement in any serious crimes involving violations of international humanitarian law or international human rights law, in contravention of international law. Furthermore, the agreement guaranteed judicial immunity to Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) members for past political and military actions and committed the Government to the conditional release of designated prisoners and detainees, as well as to ensuring the safe return of associated refugee families of the group from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

13. On 20 October, President Ghani issued a decree to establish a six-member Joint Executive Commission with representatives from the Government and Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) to oversee the implementation of the agreement. The Commission held its first meeting on 6 November. In a second decree, the Afghan security forces were instructed to stop fighting against militias affiliated with Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) until their reintegration was completed. Discussions about the removal (delisting) of the group's leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, from the list of individuals sanctioned under Security Council resolution 1267 (1999) continued. To date, no formal request for the removal of Mr. Hekmatyar has been received by the Security Council Committee, either from Afghanistan as the country of origin or from the United States of America as the original listing State. On 12 November, Mr. Hekmatyar issued a statement asserting that Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) had no links to Al-Qaida, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or any other terrorist group, a precondition for delisting.

14. The High Peace Council made some progress in developing its future configuration, finalizing a list of 52 members, completing consultations on the Afghanistan National Peace and Reconciliation Strategy and submitting a revised structure to donors on 4 October. Provincial peace councils continued to function in a reduced format, and outreach by local authorities, tribal elders and ulema remained limited owing to volatile security conditions and the status of funding, which remained under discussion.

B. Security

15. The security situation further deteriorated during the reporting period with intensifying armed clashes between the Afghan security forces and the Taliban. Overall, the number of armed clashes between January and October 2016 increased by 22 per cent over 2015, reaching its highest level since the United Nations started recording incidents in 2007 and surpassing the previous record year of 2011. Although successful in securing all provincial capitals, the Afghan security forces continued to be challenged by the Taliban across Afghanistan.

16. Throughout the fall, the Taliban maintained a high operational tempo, intensifying its pressure on the provincial capitals of Helmand, Uruzgan, Farah and Kunduz while continuing to challenge government control in key districts and attempting to cut off key highways and supply routes. Between 16 August and 17 November, the United Nations recorded 6,261 security incidents across the

country, which represented a 9 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2015 and an 18 per cent increase against the same period in 2014.

17. On 3 October, the Taliban entered the Kunduz city centre. Expelled after only one week, Taliban fighters have maintained a significant presence in the city outskirts, despite clearance operations by the Afghan security forces supported by international military forces. The Taliban also captured the district administrative centres of Ghormach (Faryab Province), Omnah (Paktika Province) and Nawah-ye Barakzai (Helmand Province), in addition to launching offensives against district centres in the north-eastern, northern, south-eastern and eastern regions. The security forces have retaken control of Ghormach only.

18. Consistent with previous trends, armed clashes during the period accounted for the majority of security incidents at 65 per cent, followed by improvised explosive devices at 18 per cent. The southern, south-eastern and eastern regions continued to account for the majority of security incidents in the country with 66 per cent of the total incidents recorded during the period.

19. Anti-government elements continued their asymmetric attacks through abductions, intimidation and assassinations. In total, from 16 August to 17 November, 183 assassinations, including 27 failed attempts, were recorded, representing a 32 per cent decrease against the same period in 2015. In addition, 80 abductions were recorded across the country, including 11 instances of mass abductions. The number of suicide attacks increased to 19 from 18 in the same period in 2015. High-profile attacks in Kabul continued, including a complex attack against the Ministry of Defence on 5 September, which resulted in 41 people killed, and for which the Taliban claimed responsibility. On 12 November, the Taliban claimed responsibility for a suicide attack against the Bagram airfield in Parwan Province, which resulted in four people killed.

20. The operational capacity of the Afghan security forces remained under strain in the areas of command and control, leadership and logistics. Some progress was achieved in improving Afghan Air Force readiness and operational engagement. In October, Afghan Army troop levels and Afghan National Police numbers reached 87 per cent and 95 per cent, respectively, of target amounts.

21. In addition to the armed conflict between the Afghan security forces and the Taliban, fighting continued with Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant — Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP). Since my previous report, Afghan security forces, supported by international military assets, have conducted regular air and ground operations against ISIL-KP in both Nangarhar and Kunar Provinces. These operations have confined the group's presence in both provinces. An additional, smaller presence of ISIL-KP exists in Nuristan Province. ISIL-KP conducted four suicide attacks, including on 11 October in Kabul, on the holiday of Ashura, and on 21 November in Kabul against a Shia mosque. Other attacks claimed by ISIL-KP included a suicide attack on 31 October against the guesthouse of community leaders in the Pachir wa Agam district of Nangarhar Province and a suicide attack on 16 November against the vehicle of the presidential protection security forces in Kabul, which resulted in the death of 8 civilians and injured 13.

22. During the reporting period, 26 of the recorded incidents were either directly or indirectly against the United Nations. These included one case of killing, five

cases of intimidation and eight criminal-related incidents that affected mainly national staff members. On 22 October in Nangarhar Province, a United Nations road mission came under direct attack, including with rocket-propelled grenades. No staff sustained injuries. Owing to the deteriorating security situation, the United Nations temporarily reduced its footprint in the cities of Kunduz and Farah in October. Operations in both locations have since resumed.

C. Regional cooperation

23. Since my previous report, relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have remained strained. Nevertheless, dialogue continued, including on economic cooperation. President Ghani met the Adviser to the Prime Minister of Pakistan on Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz, on the margins of the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan. Pakistan pledged $500 million in economic assistance to Afghanistan and was publicly thanked by both the President and Mr. Abdullah. However, several members of the lower house of the National Assembly, as well as demonstrators in Paktika Province on 7 October, called upon President Ghani to reject the assistance from Pakistan and accused Pakistan of supporting terrorism, calling for its cessation. President Ghani condemned the attack in Quetta, Pakistan, on 24 October, during which at least 61 Pakistani police cadets were killed, and reiterated his call for regional cooperation against terrorism.

24. Afghanistan and India continued their close cooperation: on 14 and 15 September President Ghani visited New Delhi, where he and the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, called upon those concerned to cease providing support and safe havens to terrorists, including those who target Afghanistan and India. The Government of India pledged an additional $1 billion in development assistance to Afghanistan and renewed its commitment to the trilateral Islamic Republic of Iran-Afghanistan-India transit corridor through the Iranian port of Chabahar. On 16 September, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan reiterated concerns that Afghanistan was increasingly being used by "a neighbour" for subversive activities inside Pakistan. On 21 September, a trilateral meeting was held between Afghanistan, India and the United States in New York, during which the countries reaffirmed a shared interest in advancing peace and security in the region and countering terrorism. On 4 October, the European Union hosted a dinner with international partners and countries, including those from the region. The European Union stated that common ground existed for regional political support of peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.

25. Afghanistan undertook efforts to deepen engagement with Gulf States, including on a peace process and cooperation on counter-terrorism. Mr. Abdullah visited Saudi Arabia from 17 to 19 October and received pledges from King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud for supporting a peace process, countering terrorist financing and providing development assistance. On 25 October, President Ghani travelled to Qatar, whose leadership committed to supporting the peace process and announced plans to open an embassy in Kabul.

26. Infrastructure development and security cooperation continued between Central Asian countries, Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. On 7 September, construction began on the Afghan section of a railway linking Herat in

western Afghanistan to the Iranian rail network. Trade and connectivity were also the focus of a visit to Herat on 30 October by the Governor of Khorasan-e Razavi Province in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Turkmenistan and Afghanistan inaugurated a rail sector connecting the Atamyrat-Imamnazar railway in Turkmenistan to Aqina in Afghanistan on 30 October. Regional cooperation on addressing security challenges and initiatives to strengthen regional economic cooperation featured at the centre of discussions at the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process Senior Officials Meeting held in New York on 23 September. The need to link infrastructure development with regional policy cooperation was further emphasized during the Regional Economic Cooperation side event held on 4 October on the margins of the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, during which regional countries welcomed five regional connectivity projects on the movement of goods, energy and data identified as priorities by Afghanistan. On 2 and 3 November, at a meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Mr. Abdullah called for support for the full membership of Afghanistan in the Organization, describing it as an important platform for regional security cooperation.

27. Afghanistan and Uzbekistan increased their engagement during the reporting period. President Ghani discussed bilateral economic cooperation with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, Abdulaziz Kamilov, on 4 October, on the margins of the Brussels Conference. The Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Mr. Rabbani, visited Tashkent to attend the forty-third session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation on 18 and 19 October. During his visit, he signed an extradition treaty with Mr. Kamilov, who reaffirmed his country's commitment to strengthening bilateral cooperation and to participating actively in all international meetings and conferences on Afghanistan.

III. Human rights

28. On 19 October, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released its report on the protection of civilians in Afghanistan covering the period from 1 January to 30 September. UNAMA documented 8,397 civilian casualties (2,562 deaths and 5,835 injuries), representing a 1 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2015. The casualty figures include 877 women (240 deaths and 637 injured), a 12 per cent decrease compared with the same period in 2015. UNAMA attributed 61 per cent of all civilian casualties to anti-government elements; 23 per cent to pro-government forces; and 11 per cent to ground fighting between pro-government forces and anti-government elements where the responsible party could not be identified. Of the civilian casualties, 5 per cent were attributed to unexploded ordnance or explosive remnants of war. Ground engagements remained the leading cause of civilian casualties, causing 39 per cent of all civilian casualties, followed by suicide and complex attacks and improvised explosive devices. While UNAMA recorded decreases in civilian casualties attributed to suicide and complex attacks and improvised explosive devices, child casualties increased by 15 per cent compared with the same period in 2015.

29. UNAMA also documented a 67 per cent increase in civilian casualties caused by explosive remnants of war and a 72 per cent increase in civilian casualties caused

by aerial operations carried out by international and Afghan security forces. That pattern continued from September until November, with air strikes targeting anti-government elements causing civilian casualties in Nangarhar, Uruzgan and Kunduz Provinces. This included an international military air strike against the Taliban in the city of Kunduz on 3 November that resulted in the death of 32 civilians and injured 50, the majority of whom were women and children. On 2 October, the working group established by the Civilian Casualty Avoidance and Mitigation Board to draft an action plan for implementing the national policy on civilian casualty mitigation held its first meeting. Relevant ministries were advised to review their rules of engagement accordingly. As a member of the working group and an observer to the Civilian Casualty Avoidance and Mitigation Board, UNAMA provides technical input in line with international law and practices.

30. The Taliban attack on the city of Kunduz resulted in urban fighting that continued until 13 October. Between 3 and 13 October, UNAMA documented a preliminary figure of 328 civilian casualties (10 deaths and 318 injured) from incidents in the city of Kunduz and surrounding districts. The majority of civilian casualties reportedly resulted from ground fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan security forces.

31. Attacks conducted by anti-government elements directly targeting civilians or in civilian-populated areas continued. On 11 October, ISIL-KP claimed responsibility for a complex attack on a Shia shrine during the Ashura commemoration in Kabul, which resulted in the death of 19 civilians and injured 60. On 12 October in the Balkh district of Balkh Province, 18 civilians were killed and 47 injured in a remote-controlled detonation of an improvised explosive device at a Shia shrine. No group has claimed responsibility. On 10 November, a suicide attacker detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device targeting the German consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif, killing 4 civilians and injuring 128, including 19 women and 38 children. The Taliban claimed responsibility. On 21 November, at least 32 civilians were killed and 50 injured in a suicide attack against a Shia mosque in Kabul. ISIL-KP claimed responsibility.

32. On 18 October, UNAMA issued a report on the attack in Kabul on 23 July against ethnic Hazara demonstrators, in which 85 civilians were killed and more than 400 injured. In the report, it was concluded that the attack deliberately targeted civilians and constituted a serious violation of international humanitarian law that might amount to a war crime. It was also noted that the attack appeared to have deliberately targeted persons belonging to a specific ethnic and religious community. ISIL-KP claimed responsibility for the attack, employing language that advocated religious hatred and violence.

33. Between 1 July and 30 September, the country task force on monitoring and reporting documented and verified 438 incidents that resulted in 919 child casualties (245 deaths and 674 injuries). Ground engagements remained the leading cause of child casualties, resulting in 512 casualties, followed by improvised explosive devices, with 149 child casualties, and explosive remnants of war, with 135 child casualties. The task force attributed the remaining child casualties to tactics including aerial bombardments, incidents of targeted killing where children were bystanders, and suicide attacks.

34. The country task force attributed 411 child casualties (45 per cent), the largest number, to anti-government elements, including 324 casualties attributed to the Taliban, followed by pro-government forces (33 per cent), of which 82 per cent were attributed to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. Five casualties were attributed to cross-border shelling. The remaining 200 child casualties could not be attributed to any party to the conflict. During the reporting period, the task force verified 38 incidents targeting or affecting health services and health-related personnel, compared with 19 in the previous quarter. The task force also verified 34 incidents targeting or affecting education and education-related personnel, 3 incidents of abductions involving 1 girl and 10 boys and 28 incidents of denial of humanitarian access. The task force verified the recruitment and use of at least nine boys. The majority of the violations were attributed to anti-government elements. The Ministry of the Interior continued to expand the number of child protection units in Afghan National Police recruitment centres and opened four new units in Daykundi, Paktiya, Takhar and Badakhshan provinces, bringing their total number throughout the country to 17.

35. The Government made efforts to address the workplace conditions for women employees and strengthen the legal framework against harassment. On 25 October, the Ministry of Women's Affairs issued a report highlighting obstacles to women's entry and career advancement in government institutions, including lack of leadership opportunities, nepotism, inadequate infrastructure and harassment. On 20 October, the United Nations completed the first round of a capacity development programme on transformational leadership for 39 women ministers and senior officials. The training was aimed at improving their leadership capacity and influence on gender equality. During the reporting period, at least nine provincial commissions on the elimination of harassment against women were established pursuant to the regulation combating such harassment approved in 2015. On 9 November, the lower house of the National Assembly approved a law on the elimination of harassment against women and girls.

36. The United Nations continued its efforts to advance Afghan women's equal and full participation in building peace and security. On 25 October, the United Nations hosted the annual Global Open Day event in Kabul on Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security in parallel with events in 13 provinces focused on women and violent extremism in Afghanistan. The more than 400 participants, over half of whom were Afghan women from civil society, recognized women's crucial role in fostering a peaceful society and challenging radical ideologies by dissuading members of their families and communities from becoming violent extremists. In line with efforts facilitating the implementation of the resolution 1325 (2000) agenda, on 28 November UNAMA briefed the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security, co-chaired by Spain and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, for the second time in 2016. Together with national institutions and civil society, UNAMA conducted public awareness campaigns and training on women's rights across the country. For example, to strengthen the capacity of security sector personnel to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, UNAMA trained 525 members of policewomen councils in 20 provinces in October and November, focusing on human rights and domestic legal frameworks protecting women from violence.

37. During the annual 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign from 25 November to 10 December, the United Nations supported outreach activities across the country with national institutions and civil society. This included radio programmes, theatre performances and debates aimed at mobilizing the public, as well as religious and community leaders, to address violence against women and call for investment in women and girls.

38. On 29 September, the Cabinet of Ministers approved the revised penal code after a four-year process supported by the United Nations. The revised code incorporates the required criminal provisions from the United Nations Convention against Corruption and reduces the number of crimes subject to the death penalty by more than 50 per cent. The code also incorporates other significant provisions, including all provisions of the Rome Statute relating to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, criminal liability against civilian superiors or military commanders who fail to prevent or punish subordinates who commit these crimes, and prohibition on the practice of land-grabbing with safeguards for displaced persons; and expands the 1976 definition of the crime of torture to comply with the Convention. Meanwhile, the revised version of the presidential decree as amended by the National Assembly in June formally took effect on 6 October.

IV. Implementation of the Kabul process and the coordination of development assistance

39. On 5 October, Afghanistan and the European Union co-hosted the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, attended by 75 countries and 26 international organizations. International partners confirmed their intention to provide $15.2 billion in support of the country's development priorities until 2020. At the Conference, President Ghani and Mr. Abdullah highlighted their Government's progress in public finance, private sector promotion, agriculture and anti-corruption. They stressed the importance of Afghan-led peace processes as a facilitating factor for development. In the Conference communiqué, participants reaffirmed their commitment to the three pillars of the Transformation Decade, including Afghan-led State- and institution-building as outlined in the Afghan National Peace and Development Framework and the Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework; sustained international support and funding at or near current levels until 2020 with increased aid effectiveness; and regional and international support for ending violence to foster economic development and improve regional economic cooperation, as well as for a political process towards lasting peace and reconciliation. In the communiqué, the continuing imperative to protect and implement constitutional and international human rights was acknowledged, with special attention to the rights of women and children and to combating torture, ill-treatment and discrimination.

40. The Brussels Conference was held against the backdrop of a significant drop in investment and continued economic decline. According to data released by the Afghanistan Investment Support Agency on 15 October, domestic investment decreased by 47.42 per cent and foreign direct investment by 55.68 per cent during the first half of 2016, compared with the same period in 2015. The agriculture sector was the most affected, with an 85 per cent decline in investments. The drop in

investment is attributed primarily to worsening security conditions, political volatility, pressures on the economy following the influx of returnees, and overall uncertainties on short-term economic growth rates.

41. In an effort to mitigate the consequences of dramatic declines in investment, the Government and the World Bank announced funding for community-based development initiatives. On 25 September, the Government announced that $638 million from the International Development Association of the World Bank, the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund administrated by the World Bank, and the Government would be allocated to support four years of community-based development initiatives planned and overseen by community development councils.

42. The Government continued to pursue its anti-corruption agenda, including the investigation and prosecution of major corruption cases and the strengthening of the regulatory and legal framework. On 2 October, the President inaugurated the new Anti-Corruption Justice Centre. To date, the Centre has received eight cases meeting its jurisdictional threshold. The first trial was held on 12 November, resulting in the conviction of a bank branch manager for embezzlement of $152,500. The second trial was completed on 19 November and resulted in the conviction of a high-ranking prosecutor in the Attorney General's Office for bribery and a two-and-a-half-year sentence with a fine.

43. The Government prioritized the preparation of anti-corruption strategies by the five ministries generating the most revenues, namely the Ministries of Finance; Mines and Petroleum; Commerce and Industries; Transport and Civil Aviation; and Communications and Information Technology. Following their submission to the Cabinet and review by the High Council on Governance, Justice and Anti-Corruption, the five draft strategies are currently undergoing further revision. In September, the secretariat of the High Council held consultations with the international community, civil society and government institutions on the drafting of the national anti-corruption strategy to meet the commitment made in the Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework.

44. UNAMA marked the first International Day for Universal Access to Information on 28 September with outreach events held in Kabul and eight provinces. On 16 October, the President issued a decree aimed at accelerating the implementation of the Access to Information Law adopted in 2014 by requiring all government institutions to categorize confidential information, hold weekly media briefings and monthly press conferences on their activities, and send monthly performance reports to the Office of Administrative Affairs.

45. The Government continued its work on the revision of the subnational governance policy, one of the Government's short-term commitments under the Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework. The draft policy was shared with donors for comments on 27 October. During the reporting period, four new district governors were appointed through a merit-based recruitment process, bringing the total number of district governors appointed by the National Unity Government under such a process to 83 out of 376 district governors.

46. The Government took steps to implement its 2015 policy on police civilianization. On 28 August, the Minister of the Interior introduced 31 civilian deputy provincial chiefs of police appointed through a merit-based process. These

deputies are expected to support the provincial chiefs of police on administrative and logistics issues, including with regard to procurement to reduce inefficient procedures and corrupt practices. UNAMA continued to support officials of the Ministry of the Interior in finalizing a detailed action plan to address key gaps and redundancies in the areas of police leadership, training, command and control, monitoring and evaluation.

V. Humanitarian assistance

47. The humanitarian situation became ever more fragile, with rapidly increasing numbers of new conflict-induced internal displacements exacerbated by the surge of more than 600,000 returning refugees and undocumented Afghans from Pakistan. Combined with the existing needs in Afghanistan, 4.5 million people currently require humanitarian assistance.

48. As at 30 November, the United Nations had recorded 515,865 newly internally displaced persons since January 2016 in 31 of the 34 provinces, with more than 240,000 displaced since mid-August. This represents the highest number of internally displaced persons on record and a 15 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2015. In October, more than 70,000 people were displaced as a result of the Taliban's attempt to take control of the city of Kunduz. An estimated 16,500 people were also displaced in the past two months in southern Afghanistan owing to intensified conflict, primarily from Helmand and Uruzgan Provinces. The United Nations and non-governmental organizations provided humanitarian assistance, including cash, health services and supplies, shelter, food and non-food items, to the displaced populations. Access constraints limited both a complete understanding of the humanitarian needs and the response thereto. As at 3 November, 63 aid workers had been abducted during 2016, compared with 93 in 2015.

49. During her visit to Afghanistan from 11 to 20 November, the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons called for enhanced support for durable solutions, improved access to national identity cards for internally displaced persons and the full implementation of the national policy on internally displaced persons adopted in February 2014.

50. The number of refugees returning through the United Nations repatriation programme increased by 450 per cent since 1 July, compared with the very low numbers between January and June. By 29 November, a total of 372,282 Afghans registered as refugees had returned from Pakistan, while 2,220 had returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 167 from other countries. In October alone, there were 148,692 Afghan refugees newly returned from Pakistan. In November, returns slowed considerably, owing to the temporary suspension by UNHCR of facilitated registration during the winter. Between 1 and 12 November, 52,595 refugees returned to Afghanistan. According to returnee monitoring, the significant spike in return from Pakistan in the second half of the year coincided with a deterioration of the protection environment for Afghans in several areas of Pakistan and uncertainty as to whether Afghans would be able to stay in the long term in Pakistan.

51. Deportations and returns of undocumented Afghans from Pakistan also increased significantly, with more than 204,000 arrivals since 1 July compared with

nearly 34,000 for the first six months of the year. Arrivals remained steady from the Islamic Republic of Iran, averaging 30,000 to 40,000 per month, in line with seasonal trends. As at 30 November, the 642,737 undocumented Afghan returnees included 444,210 spontaneous returns (227,921 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 216,289 from Pakistan) and 198,527 deportations (176,178 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 22,349 from Pakistan). Returnees from Pakistan continue to cite increased policing and uncertainty over their status in Pakistan, including a fear of eviction, as the main reasons for leaving. The deadline of 15 November for all undocumented Afghans in Pakistan to acquire documentation to be issued by the Government of Afghanistan or face future deportation has passed.

52. Many of the newly displaced and returnee Afghans moving within Afghanistan are vulnerable and prone to secondary or repeated displacement because of security concerns and the limited ability of cities to absorb the influx. An assessment of more than 6,000 returnee families in the eastern region found that many faced challenges in gaining access to food, shelter and basic services, in particular health care and adequate water and sanitation.

53. Afghan migration to Europe continued at a slower pace compared with 2015, when 209,367 Afghans arrived by sea. From 1 January to 31 October 2016, 47,149 Afghans arrived in Europe by sea, representing 14 per cent of arrivals. In September 2016, that figure stood at 17 per cent.

54. Overall returnee numbers significantly decreased during the third quarter of the year, with 1,439 returnees assisted, compared with 2,639 during the second quarter out of a total of 5,478 in 2016. The International Organization for Migration assisted 731 voluntary returnees from Europe, of whom 75 per cent were men, between 1 September and 31 October 2016, compared with 188 for the same period in 2015 and 4,527 between 1 January and 31 July 2016. Almost half of the returnees departed from Germany, and increasing numbers were reported from Greece and Turkey. On 2 October, the Government of Afghanistan and the European Union issued the declaration entitled "Joint Way Forward on Migration Issues" to address and prevent "irregular migration" and returns.

55. Afghanistan remains one of three polio-endemic countries in the world. Four new polio cases were identified during the reporting period, bringing the total number of new polio cases in Afghanistan in 2016 to 12 as at 31 October 2016. The cases were reported from the east, south and south-east of the country. Efforts to eradicate polio continued but were challenged by security and access constraints. The number of children who could not be vaccinated almost doubled during the reporting period to an estimated 600,000 children in October, primarily because of insecurity, active fighting and bans by anti-government elements. This includes more than 170,000 children who were inaccessible in Kunduz Province because of bans by anti-government elements on house-to-house vaccination activities, and an estimated 300,000 children who were inaccessible in Farah Province and southern Afghanistan owing to active fighting. Accessibility improved in eastern Afghanistan owing to successful access dialogues with representatives of anti-government elements through community leaders, with the number of inaccessible children being reduced from 71,000 in August to 23,000 in October.

56. Humanitarian access constraints continue to be recorded and are associated primarily with insecurity and conflict-related road closures in the eastern, southern

and northern parts of the country. In total, 67 incidents against non-governmental organizations, the United Nations and other international organizations were registered between 1 August and 31 October, compared with 45 in the previous quarter. Four aid workers were killed and four injured during the period compared with five killed and five injured during the previous period.

57. Mine action partners, coordinated by the United Nations, cleared 287 minefields, 12 battlefields and 18 firing ranges between 1 August and 30 October, which resulted in 29 communities being declared mine-free and 67,493 individuals across 83.8 km^2 able to resume free movement for their activities. It is estimated that 3,795 minefields, 323 battlefields and 59 contaminated firing ranges remain, affecting 1,564 communities, along with a continued threat from pressure-plate improvised explosive devices. Since January, the United Nations and mine action partners have provided risk education concerning mines and explosive remnants of war to 466,030 returnees from Pakistan at encashment centres and other registration points.

58. On 5 September, the United Nations launched a flash appeal for $152 million to provide life-saving assistance for internally displaced persons, undocumented returnees and registered refugees. Out of $42.2 million in pledges so far, $40.2 million has been received. As at 20 November, overall humanitarian funding for Afghanistan stood at $401 million, of which $177.7 million was designated for activities envisaged in the 2016 Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan, now 52 per cent funded. To date, the common humanitarian fund in Afghanistan has received $46.7 million in 2016, with funding focused on emergency health care, assistance to displaced families and humanitarian assessments.

VI. Counter-narcotics

59. The Afghan Ministry of Counter-Narcotics and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime released the executive summary of the Afghanistan opium survey report on 23 October. In the report, it was noted that the total area under opium poppy cultivation increased by 10 per cent in 2016, to an estimated 201,000 ha. Cultivation increased particularly strongly in northern Afghanistan and in Badghis Province, and opium poppy is grown in 21 of 34 provinces, compared with 20 in 2015. For the first time since 2008, opium cultivation was reported in Jawzjan Province. With some 80,273 ha (40 per cent of the national total), Helmand remains the country's leading opium-cultivating province, followed by Badghis, Kandahar and Uruzgan Provinces.

60. The report includes estimates on potential opium production, which contain some methodological limitations in areas where a yield survey could not be undertaken owing to security constraints. Potential opium production in 2016 amounted to 4,800 tons, an increase of 43 per cent from its 2015 level of 3,300 tons. The high production can be attributed to increases in the opium yield per hectare and in the cultivation and to extremely limited eradication efforts due to funding and security constraints. Most importantly, yields increased significantly as a result of favourable weather conditions and the absence of crop disease. The nationwide increases were mostly caused by a rise in production in the western and southern regions of Afghanistan by 37 and 36 per cent, respectively. Both regions account for

84 per cent of the total opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. In addition, eradication efforts decreased by 91 per cent compared with 2015, resulting in only 355 ha, or 1 per cent, of total areas under cultivation eradicated in 2016.

61. Between 18 August and 31 October, Afghan law enforcement authorities reportedly conducted 425 counter-narcotics operations, which resulted in the seizure of 1,002 kg of heroin, 29,425 kg of morphine, 29,922 kg of opium, 5 kg of methamphetamine, 1,788 kg of hashish, 269 MDMA tablets, 35,887 kg of solid precursor chemicals and 10,753 litres of liquid precursor chemicals. In addition, 16 heroin processing laboratories were reportedly dismantled, 485 suspects arrested and 110 vehicles, 44 weapons, 74 mobile telephones and one radio seized. One member of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces was killed and six wounded in the course of the operations.

62. Ministers and heads of drug agencies from Afghanistan, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Pakistan and Central Asian States met in September in Dushanbe for a conference on challenges surrounding the illicit economy and in promoting the licit economy in Afghanistan, organized by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia. Investigators from Afghanistan, China, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan met on 8 November in Almaty, Kazakhstan, to review investigations of illicit precursor seizures.

VII. Mission support

63. Following the completion of preparatory activities, the next phase of the Umoja platform was launched in UNAMA on 1 November, adding more than 1,100 national staff as new users. Between 1 August and 31 October, UNAMA conducted 278 road and 623 air missions, as well as 343 reverse outreach missions, during which district representatives visited UNAMA field offices.

VIII. Observations

64. The joint commitment of Afghanistan and the international community was conclusively demonstrated at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Summit, held in July, and the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, held in October. At the Brussels Conference, the political will to assist Afghanistan was matched by the confirmed intention to provide $15.2 billion to support the development priorities of Afghanistan until 2020. Not only did that amount exceed original expectations, but the discussions in Brussels also showed a deep appreciation for the challenges facing Afghanistan as it moves towards self-reliance. Combined with pledges made at the NATO Summit, Afghanistan has secured $8 billion in security and development assistance for each of the next four years. The Government and people of Afghanistan are currently able to seize that opportunity and meet the many challenges ahead.

65. Capitalizing on the current opportunities will require overcoming complex political, security, economic and humanitarian challenges. Continuing political tensions within and outside the Government further tested the unity and cohesion of

the political leadership. Increasing numbers of security incidents and attacks placed the Afghan security forces under heavy pressure as they fought to retain control of provincial capitals and district centres. The rising numbers of internally displaced persons and returning refugees and undocumented Afghans underlined the hardships facing the Afghan population and strained humanitarian response mechanisms. Those factors, along with the ongoing economic difficulties, require the Government's determined resolve. Building on their impressive commitments at the Brussels Conference, I reiterate my call upon President Ghani and Mr. Abdullah to continue their active engagement to chart a joint way forward for the benefit of the Afghan people.

66. In recent weeks, a number of leading Afghan political figures have taken steps to play a more constructive role. Public demands to replace the Government have diminished. All stakeholders are encouraged to seek positive results so that the Government can meet the manifold challenges facing the country.

67. The commitments from the NATO Summit and the Brussels Conference provide the resources and possibility for essential reforms, including in the areas of poverty reduction, governance, the rule of law and elections, and human rights. The Afghan National Peace and Development Framework and associated national priority programmes will serve as guides for funding decisions. Their realization will require constructive dialogue on development, aid policy and reform progress.

68. Maintaining the momentum from the Brussels Conference with robust follow-up action is essential. Even with the announced levels of civilian assistance, economic growth is expected to remain slow in the coming years. The Government has brought commendable focus to reforms, including for strengthening public financial management and developing a national anti-corruption strategy, in order to safeguard the public trust and ensure the effective use of resources. Through prosecutions guided by due process, the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre, fully operational at present, can increase the public's trust in State institutions and the Government's pledge to combat corruption.

69. I am encouraged by the renewed commitment of the Government, as outlined in the Brussels Conference communiqué, to promoting and protecting women's rights and economic empowerment. The equal and meaningful participation of women in the political and economic sphere will be essential for Afghanistan to meet its development objectives. At the recent Global Open Day events held throughout the country, Afghan women underlined their role in fostering a peaceful society, including in preventing violent extremism. Those commitments need to be translated into action, including continued concrete work and national financing to implement the national action plan on Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and relevant legal and policy frameworks protecting the rights of women and especially protecting women from violence.

70. I take note of the steps to implement the amended electoral legal framework and move towards preparing for elections. The nomination of candidates for electoral commissions in an open process accessible to representatives of civil society, media and the international community was a welcome development. An inclusive, consultative and transparent appointment process offers an opportunity to rebuild public trust and confidence in the electoral institutions.

71. Those encouraging steps were taken in the face of an intense conflict characterized by an increasing number of armed clashes and continuing complex attacks. While the Afghan security forces secured provincial capitals in 2016, support from the international military was at times crucial. In the absence of a comprehensive and viable peace process, predictable international support will be required for the overall sustainability of the security sector, combined with the political leadership necessary to ensure sufficient capacity and morale, in the light of high casualty rates.

72. The intensifying conflict continues to take a heavy toll on the civilian population through deaths, injuries and displacement. The evolving pattern of the conflict, in particular the increasing ground engagements, has added to the very difficult and dangerous environment for civilians and, most starkly, children. All parties to the conflict must increase efforts to ensure that civilians are protected. After the launch of the Government's national civilian casualty prevention and mitigation policy in July, it is my hope that the action plan can be completed without delay, to enable full implementation.

73. The ever-rising numbers of internally displaced persons are extremely vulnerable. Adequate assistance and mechanisms are essential to meeting their needs, including appropriate access to documentation and land. Internally displaced persons require protection and assistance from the Government, supported by national and international partners. I encourage the Government to accelerate the full implementation of the national policy on internally displaced persons, including the creation of conditions conducive to durable solutions. The fair and fast allocation of land and creation of livelihoods is integral if displaced people are to build a long-term future in their country.

74. The number of newly displaced persons is increasing in the context of an overall rise in the number of Afghans on the move. It is currently estimated that up to 1.6 million Afghans will have been internally displaced or newly returned from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran by the end of 2016. They will require assistance, as will those who repatriate from Europe. With the inclusion of internal displacement and refugees in the Afghan National Peace and Development Framework, such issues were recognized by many at the Brussels Conference as an element compounding the country's development challenges. In addition to immediate humanitarian assistance, government initiatives to develop an overall strategy for addressing the combined needs of the displaced and returnees are crucial. I welcome the proposal for a stronger coordinated approach between the Government, donors and the United Nations in making the transition from humanitarian support for displaced people and returnee populations to their integration within communities. Without the development of concrete plans to manage the process of integration, food insecurity and poverty will continue.

75. Peace remains imperative if Afghanistan is to reach its full potential. I take note of the importance of the peace agreement of 29 September between the Government and Hizb-i Islami (Gulbuddin) and the latter's commitments to renounce violence and links with terrorist groups. Agreements that reduce the level of violence and promote reconciliation, including by addressing the legitimate concerns of victims of the conflict, are important steps towards lasting peace in Afghanistan. As the agreement is implemented, I urge that the rights of the victims

of serious violations of international humanitarian law and gross violations of human rights, and their families, be made a central consideration. Beyond fulfilling obligations under international law, such processes also aid in reconciliation by enabling victims and survivors of violations to let go of their grievances.

76. I regret that efforts towards direct talks between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban have not progressed further. The Taliban movement appears to remain focused on combat operations under the leadership of Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada. Constructive engagement by Member States will be essential to creating conditions conducive for Afghan-led peace talks. In this regard, I note that the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan remains challenging, and I urge the two Governments to continue dialogue calibrated to promote peace and stability in their mutual interest.

77. Countries in the region have a critical role to play in supporting Afghanistan in meeting its complex political, security, humanitarian and economic challenges. I call upon them to play a constructive role in promoting stability and economic growth benefiting all countries in the region. The regional infrastructure initiatives presented at the Brussels Conference can serve as an important pathway towards prosperity and stability and should be prioritized. I am encouraged by recent tangible progress in the area of infrastructure, including transport links between Afghanistan and Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Turkmenistan, and enhanced engagement with Uzbekistan.

78. I thank all the United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative, Tadamichi Yamamoto, for their continued dedication under challenging conditions to fulfil our commitments in support of the people of Afghanistan.